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ABSTRACT

Part of the Small Town Strategy series, this publication presents some of the more common techniques for identifying problems and setting objectives. A problem-solving process which can be used in many different situtations is presented. The process includes the following sequence: problem statement, goal statement; objectives, strategies, implementation plan, and evaluation. A specific example of how this process can be used forms the content. A worksheet, showing the elements of the planning process in outline form, provides a brief working guide to the problem-solving process outlined in this publication. (NQA)

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SMALL TOWN STRATEGY

Identifying Problems and Establishing Objectives

One of the most difficult tasks in community and organizational work is determining what should be done, who should do it, when it should be completed, and how important it is in relation to other problems. There are many ways to approach making these decisions; this publication will present some of the more common techniques for identifying problems and setting objectives. While experience has shown that these techniques have worked in diverse settings, adapt them as necessary to fit your situation.

Let's take a sample problem and work it all the way through so you can see how the *process* works. A problem-solving process will be presented which can be used in many different situations. The specific example provided here for illustration forms the *content*. After you have mastered the process, substitute your own content.

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The Process

Identifying the problem and setting objectives can be accomplished through the following sequence:

1. Problem statement
2. Goal statement
3. Objectives
4. Strategies
5. Implementation plan
6. Evaluation

An Example

Now let's take a look at a specific example of how this process can be used. Grand Junction, Colorado, is a town of about 45,000 people. It is part of Mesa County, which has a population of about 70,000. Both the town and the county are growing rapidly due to energy development nearby, and local governments are faced with heavy demands for capital improvements. However, there has not been much coordination of capital projects between the political bodies. No one is setting priorities; each group seems to be going its own way without consideration for what the others are doing. The taxpayers are not getting the most services for their dollars.

At the urging of a private citizens' group, the county commissioners, the Grand Junction city council, and the county school board agreed to spend two days working together with an outside facilitator to try to develop some solutions.

1. Problem Statement

To begin the problem-solving process, the facilitator led a brainstorming session and recorded the ideas on a large newsprint pad, using felt pens. In brainstorming, the idea is to get as many ideas up on the newsprint as possible. No criticism or negative comments are allowed at this stage. Later, you can go back and group and then prioritize the ideas. Some of the ideas the group in Grand Junction came up with:

1. Public does not recognize the need for capital improvements.
1. Capital projects get negative press.
1. Elected officials need to agree on problems.
2. Timing of projects not coordinated.
2. Elected officials not unanimous in support of capital projects.
2,3. Financial limitations.
2. All funding options not being explored.
3. Legal constraints block some types of cooperation.

Then the group looked at their entire list of ideas and grouped similar concepts and labeled them with numbers. At this point the numbers had no priority rating. Some items were put into more than one category. The items numbered "1" contained the information necessary to begin writing a problem statement, or a narrative description of a problem. Number 2 items were used for the second problem statement, and so on. (If necessary for your purposes, the items can be prioritized at this point.)

To write a problem statement, use the brainstorming items in a paragraph to describe the problem. The first try will be rough and will need revision. In Grand Junction, the group worked in this way for the first problem statement (those marked "1"):

—*Citizens of Mesa County need to find 200 million dollars to finance necessary capital improvement projects.*

—*Change is threatening the lifestyle of Mesa County residents. In order to preserve that lifestyle and continue to provide its amenities, county residents will have to finance 200 million dollars in capital projects.*

—*Government officials have identified between 150 and 200 million dollars in capital expenditure needs for Mesa County. This is the result of past inactivity coupled with the pressure of current growth.*

At this point the group had a number of separate sentences, each of which described a part of the problem. None of them were entirely satisfactory, so the group reviewed some criteria for defining a problem:

- Who experiences this as a problem?
- What might happen if nothing were done?
- Does the problem fit the purpose of the organization?
- What is the purpose of the organization?
- How does the problem relate to the organization's purpose?
- What's in it for me?

- Is this problem important to me personally?
- What has happened to cause the problem?

Then the group was ready to rewrite the problem statement and condense it down to one sentence. After a couple of revisions, here is what they came up with:

- *Citizens within Mesa County are confronted with more than 200 million dollars worth of recognized public capital improvement projects which are required to meet current and anticipated short-term capital needs.*

Using the same process, the final problem statement for the second group of problems emerged:

- *Governmental entities have not fully identified their individual and the overall capital project needs throughout the countywide community. Those needs which have been identified have not been coordinated or prioritized among and between the agencies. Alternative methods of funding and resource utilization (including staffs) have not been fully identified by all agencies.*

For the third group of problems, the group was a bit more concise:

- *There is an overlay of legal, financial, environmental, and regulatory constraints creating a framework which makes capital problems difficult to solve.*

It is worth noting here that the group improved noticeably with some practice. It did not take nearly so long to write the third problem statement as it did the first. That's something you can expect to happen. With a little practice with the process, your group will improve rapidly.

Writing the problem statement is the most difficult part of this entire process. It is also the most critical step because an incorrect identification of the problem can send you off in the wrong direction. One of the most common errors is mixing up solutions and symptoms. For example, in regard to one of the specific capital improvement projects, one of the county commissioners said, "The problem is that we need a new human services building." When questioned, the commissioner revealed that she was concerned about the fragmented social services delivery system and was looking for ways to get the various human services agencies to cooperate. It soon became apparent that a new building would not solve the longstanding interagency feuds and conflicting regulations. What that commissioner had done was propose a solution without going through the problem identification sequence.

2. Goal Statement

After correctly identifying the problem and refining a single-sentence problem statement, turn it into a goal. A goal is a broad, general statement of what you want to accomplish, and the simplest way to write one is to turn the negative problem statement into a positive goal statement. For the second group of problems, the Grand Junction group wrote the following goal statement:

- *Goal: to establish an intergovernmental board which will coordinate and prioritize capital improvement projects.*

3. Objectives

The next step is to establish some objectives—specific, timely, and measurable statements of what the group wants to accomplish. An objective for the goal mentioned above might be:

- *Within 4 weeks from today (or by a certain date) the county commissioners, the school board, and the city council will have established a capital investment advisory board.*

4. Strategies

You may, in fact, have a series of such objectives. Under each of the objectives are strategies—the activities which must be undertaken to reach the goal by carrying out the objective. The above objective might also require a series of strategies:

—*By January 7, all three political entities will approve a formal resolution supporting the concept of the capital investments advisory board.*

—*Within two weeks of the approval of the concept, each entity will appoint a local citizen to sit on the advisory board.*

—*By March 1, the capital investments advisory board will have hired a full-time director.*

Strategies are another good place to use the brainstorming technique. There are many, many ways to obtain your goal, and several heads are more likely to produce an immediate idea. For a few minutes, throw out political and economic realities and consider any and all alternatives.

In weighing alternative courses against each other, you may wish to use a simple decisionmaking tool: look at the pros and cons. Imagine the strategy under consideration as stuck between two opposing forces. Then list the helping and hindering forces on the appropriate side. When you finish, you have something concrete to look at and base your decision on.

In considering the feasibility of each alternative strategy, look at the resources each would require in relation to those that are available. Resources include both tangible things—like personnel, money, equipment, and facilities—and intangible things—like time, knowledge, skill, political influence, prestige, and energy.

5. Implementation Plan

Several things need to be considered as you prepare to implement your strategies. You will need to predict what major activities are needed and in what order they should occur. Then determine a schedule for completing those activities and assign responsibility to someone for each actvity. You will also need to calculate what resources will be needed.

When considering their list of strategies, the Grand Junction group looked at its resources and decided that it made more sense to hire a director for the capital investments advisory board than to assign the responsibility to existing staff who already had too much to do. Their strategy was to hire a full-time director to work with the capital investments advisory board; the activities required to do that include:

—*Prepare a job description for the director. To be completed by February 1, by a working committee composed of mayor, county commissioners, school board members, city manager, county manager, and school superintendent.*

—*Establish hiring procedures for advertising, interviewing, and selection process. To be completed by working committee by February 1.*

Obviously, there will be more activities which need to be spelled out to complete that list, but you get the idea.

6. Evaluation

There is one other major factor to be considered as part of the implementation plan: evaluation. How will you know when you have reached the goal and objectives you established? What data will you need to collect along the way in order to make that judgment? Who will gather the data, and who will interpret it? Who will make the decision that you have indeed reached the goal based on the evaluation data provided?

In Grand Junction, the group agreed to meet again in a year to evaluate progress. The data would be collected by the director and verified by the capital investments advisory board. The group itself will make the final decision to continue the program or not at the end of the first year. Satisfactory progress will have been made during the first year if, jointly and separately, the three political entities identify and prioritize a countywide capital improvements budget and jointly fund at least two of those projects.

Worksheet

The worksheet provided here shows the elements of the planning process in outline form. It will provide you with a brief working guide to the problem-solving process outlined in this publication. When completed, the Grand Junction group's worksheet looked something like the one which follows.

Problem statement:

Governmental entities have not fully identified their individual and the overall capital project needs throughout the countywide community. These needs which have been identified have not been coordinated or prioritized among the agencies. Alternative methods of funding and resource utilization (including personnel) have not been fully identified by all agencies.

Goal:

To establish an intergovernmental board which will coordinate and prioritize capital improvement projects.

Objective:

To prioritize and cooperate on capital improvement projects on a countywide basis.

Strategies:

—*Standardize the capital improvement planning process in terms of format, data needs and collection, and timetable.*

—*Prepare and prioritize capital improvement plans for participating entities using agreed-upon format.*

—*Prepare a countywide capital improvement plan using individual plans and based on such factors as available local resources, joint funding and other cooperative local options, outside financing, timing, and other pertinent agencies and constraints.*

—*Approve countywide capital improvement plan and recommend to appropriate political entities for approval and implementation.*

Problem statement:

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Goal:

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Objective:

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Strategies:

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Implementation plan:

1. *Authorize 1-year trial period. School District 51, Grand Junction City Council, and Mesa County Commissioners will initiate by formal resolution of each entity in February, 1980.*
2. *Funding for first year will be shared by School District 51, Grand Junction City Council, and Mesa County Commissioners to initiate the program. This will be supplemented by new members and by outside funding sources as they develop.*
3. *Select an advisory board consisting of:*
   - *—3 staff members, one appointed by each chief administrator of initiating bodies.*
   - *—3 elected officials, 1 appointed by each entity.*
   - *—3 citizens, recommended by other board members and jointly affirmed by elected officials.*
   - *—1 person from city-county planning office, appointed by mayor and chairman of county commissioners, to serve in ex-officio capacity.*
4. *Establish initial 1-year terms of office, to go to staggered terms if board is deemed successful at end of 1-year trial period.*
5. *Recruit and select a full-time director to carry out the activities required to reach the goal. Director's salary to be set at $21,000-$24,000. Office space and secretary to be shared with Downtown Development Authority to minimize initial cost: 1/2 secretary @ $6,000, $300/month rent, $2,500 equipment and supplies.*

Evaluation:

Evaluate performance of organization at end of 1 year and recommend continuation, dissolution, or continuation with modification, based on how well the established goals, objectives, strategies, and timetables were met.

Implementation plan:

Evaluation:

Summary

The distinction between the process and the content of the procedure for identifying problems and setting objectives is an important one because the process has many applications. Individuals and organizations who can identify their problems can usually bring about appropriate solutions. Often, the ability to identify a problem will lead to substantial progress toward goals.

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Prepared by George H. Gault, development coordinator, Delta County, Colorado.

This publication is part of the Small Town Strategy series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:

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